



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Liberia

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The period of this report covers two governments: the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), an interim administration composed of members of previously warring factions that served from October 2003 to December 2006, and the democratically elected government installed on January 16, 2006.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Despite frequent interaction among religious groups, some tension remained evident. Some in the Muslim minority complained that Christian holy days are observed by the Government as public holidays but Muslim holy days are not. Some Muslims were dissatisfied with the Government's decision to keep shops and markets closed on Sundays. Land disputes between Mandingos and other ethnic groups in Lofa, Nimba, and Bong counties were being resolved; and no violence erupted surrounding any of these problems. The October 2004 three-day rioting, in which several mosques and churches were destroyed, was not repeated. A commission was established to investigate the October incident, and while the report was not made public, the proximate cause of the rioting was believed to be a land dispute, not a religiously motivated attack. No rioting since October 2004 resulted in the destruction of churches or mosques.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government promotes religious freedom by participating in and hosting interfaith events and by meeting regularly with prominent members of various religious communities.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 43,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 3.4 million. As much as 40 percent of the population practiced either Christianity or Christianity combined with elements of traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 40 percent exclusively practiced traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 20 percent of the population practiced Islam, which continued to gain adherents. A small percentage was Baha'i, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or atheist.

Christian denominations included the Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, Seventh-day Adventists, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Some of the Pentecostal movements were affiliated with churches outside the country, while others were independent.

The Muslim population was mainly from the Mandingo and Vai ethnic groups, which were found predominantly in the west. Ethnic groups throughout the country participated in the traditional religious practices of the Poro and Sande secret societies. Christians lived throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups worked in the country.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government sought at all levels to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion. Government ceremonies open and close with prayers and may include the singing of hymns. The prayers and hymns are usually Christian but occasionally are Islamic. There were several Muslim deputies and assistant ministers and approximately ten Muslim members in the legislature.

Major Christian holy days, including Fast and Prayer Day, Easter, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas, are observed as national holidays, while Islamic holy days are not. The Government mandates that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and major Christian holy days, an issue that Muslim leaders have brought to the Legislative Assembly and the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that it was constitutional for the Government to allow market closures on Sundays on the grounds

that markets needed to be cleaned once a week. There is no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers do so.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the Government, along with a statement of the purpose of the organization. Registration is routine, and there were no reports that the registration process was burdensome or discriminatory. Traditional indigenous religious groups are not required to register and generally do not.

The Government permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. Religious education, particularly Christian education, is taught in public schools but is not mandatory. Students can opt out of religious instruction, and parents may enroll their children in private schools for religious reasons.

The Government has not specifically dedicated material resources to anti-bias and religious tolerance education. However, it is supportive of efforts to promote interfaith understanding.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although some Muslims hold senior government positions, many Muslims believed that there is need for greater representation within the Government. Some Muslim leaders felt that certain Muslim holidays should be celebrated by the Government, since many Christian holidays are celebrated.

High-level government officials were required to take oaths when assuming their new office. Christians kissed the Bible, and Muslims kissed the Qu'ran.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religions contributed to religious freedom. The Inter-Religious Council promotes dialogue among various religious communities.

In October 2004 a property dispute escalated into widespread violence between Mandingos, who are predominantly Muslim, and other predominantly Christian ethnic groups. The violence broke out in Monrovia and spread to Kakata and other nearby towns and villages. At least twenty-five persons were killed, and several mosques and churches were looted and burned. The United Nations Peacekeepers (UNMIL) brought the situation under control after three days. The violence was widely regarded as a reflection of a land dispute with ethnic overtones rather than religious tensions.

The country's civil war, which ended in 2003, had a religious undertone in that the LURD rebels were mostly Muslim Mandingos while government troops were mostly animists and Christians. Ethnic tensions persisted between the Mandingo and several other ethnic groups.

Ritual killings, in which killers remove body parts from their victims for use in traditional rituals, reportedly occurred during the reporting period. There was little reliable information available about traditional religions associated with ritual killings, and the number of such killings was difficult to ascertain. Many believe that practitioners of traditional indigenous religions among the Grebo and Krahn, who are concentrated in the southeast, engage in ritual killings. Body parts of a person believed to be powerful are considered the most effective for ritual purposes. In some cases, the rituals reportedly involve eating body parts to gain special powers. Fighters on all sides of the civil war reportedly engaged in such practices. Most reports of ritual killings came from Southeastern counties.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officers hosted events for Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss religious freedom issues. The ambassador and other embassy officers participated in religious ceremonies and spoke at interfaith meetings to show support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

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